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ABSTRACT

During the 1970's, the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) conducted two assessments of art abilities (1974-75 and 1978-79) and two of music skills (1971-72 and 1978-79) of 9-, 13-, and 17-year-olds, giving a picture of trends in performance over the course of the decade. State assessments were also conducted by Connecticut and Minnesota for comparison to NAEP findings. Findings in music indicate that knowledge about the elements of music and musical notation have decreased, although a positive attitude toward music prevails. Findings in art indicate that although knowledge about art is low, performance does improve with age and number of classes taken. Students are less willing to accept nontraditional art, pursue artistic activities outside of school, or perceive art as important. State assessments in Minnesota and Connecticut indicate that Minnesota compares favorably over the nation in music achievement while Connecticut outperformed the nation in both music and art. Due to emphasis on back-to-basics, the arts are not being nurtured as they might be, and efforts should be made to ensure that achievement levels in art and music do not erode further by (1) promoting greater awareness of the importance of art to physical and national well-being; (2) encouraging a more sophisticated view of art; (3) allocating state recommended minimum amounts of time to art and music; (4) employing certified art and music teachers; and (5) encouraging student participation in artistic endeavors. (LH)

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ACHIEVEMENT TRENDS IN THE ARTS.

Issuegram 2.

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2. Achievement Trends in the Arts

The Issue

In recent years, emphasis in education has focused on ensuring that students have mastered the "basics" of reading and writing and that they leave school with sufficient skills to make a place for themselves in the work force. But the American concept of education has typically been broader than simply vocational instruction, seeking also to expand students' horizons in many subjects and prepare them for more than the "work" aspects of their lives. The arts are important both as vehicles for teaching higher order skills and as subjects that contribute heavily to the quality of life Americans may enjoy. They provide unique ways of knowing and may powerfully influence students' discipline and motivation. John Edward Ryor, former president of the National Educational Association, has made this case for including the arts in the nation's education curriculum:

> Quality education in its most fundamental sense cannot be separated from the culture of a society. The quality of the culture is expressed in its arts and its humanities. Those who say they can be removed from the curriculum are calling for the rape of education, for a return to "training" at the expense of "learning."*

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* Coming to Our Senses: The Significance of the Arts for American Education, New York: McGraw-Hill Company, 1977, p. 11.

Given the current emphasis on "the basics" in education, how are the arts faring in America's schools? Have they fallen by the wayside in the push to boost reading and mathematics scores?

A partial answer to these questions is available in data from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) and from several state assessment programs. National Assessment periodically measures skills of 9-, 13- and 17-year-olds in various learning areas to provide a picture of current achievement levels and changes in these levels over time. States are encouraged to use NAEP items in their assessment programs so that they can compare their results with national levels. During the 1970s, NAEP conducted two assessments of art abilities and two of music skills. The first music assessment was conducted early in the 1970s (1971-72); the first art assessment was conducted in the mid-1970s (1974-75). Second assessments in both areas were completed near the close of the seventies (1978-79), giving a picture of trends in performance over the course of the decade.

Assessments are administered to carefully designed samples of the nation's young people so results are representative of performance nationwide. Over 95,000 students from across the country participated in the latest art and music assessments.

Following National Assessment's lead, two states have assessed achievement in the arts using NAEP items. Connecticut assessed both art and music; Minnesota assessed only music. Both states assessed samples of their student populations, testing approximately 5-10% of their students.

National Assessment Findings

National Assessment's findings in the areas of art and music -- two areas often mistakenly seen as educational "frills" -- are not totally bleak, but not particularly encouraging either.

On the plus side, most students have positive attitudes toward music. In the area of art, more students at ages 9 and 13 had visited art museums at the close of the seventies than in the mid-seventies. The abilities and attitudes of 9-year-olds remained generally constant with regard to art.

On the minus side, 9- and 17-year-olds' knowledge about music has declined since the early seventies, particularly in knowledge about the elements of music -- such as rhythm, pitch and tone -- and musical notation. In art, teenagers' performance dropped by approximately 2 percentage points. By the close of the seventies, the teenagers were less inclined to view art as important, less willing to accept non-

traditional forms of art and less likely to pursue artistic activities outside of school.

Despite the fact that funding for education was often short during the latter part of the 1970s, most students had been exposed to arts instruction. Seventy-two percent of the 13-year-olds and 82% of the 17-year-olds had taken a class in general music or music appreciation. About a third of the junior and senior high school students said they had participated in a vocal or instrumental music group for at least a year. Among 9-year-olds, 84% nationally reported being taught music in school during the 1978-79 school year.

About three-quarters of the 13-year-olds reported taking at least one art course in seventh or eighth grade. Approximately one in six 17-year-olds said they were enrolled in an art course at the time of the assessment. Over 90% of the students at all three ages attended school offering art instruction.

Exposure to arts instruction does have a bearing on achievement. Those who had participated in school music groups -- either vocal or instrumental -- did better on music items than those who had not, and those who had participated the longest had the greatest advantage. High school students who had taken four or more art classes exhibited superior design skills, although they did not necessarily know more about art history than their less "educated" classmates or use more sophisticated criteria in judging art.

Following are some specifics of students' abilities in the areas of music and art as revealed in the National Assessment studies.

Music. Both 9- and 17-year-olds' achievement on music items went down between the 1971-72 and the 1978-79 assessments -- 9-year-olds' achievement declining by 3.3 percentage points and 17-year-olds' declining by 2.5 percentage points. Thirteen-year-olds' overall performance remained stable during this period.

Declines for the 9- and 17-year-olds were primarily accounted for by decreases in their knowledge about the elements of music -- such as rhythm, pitch and tone -- and musical notation. Knowledge about musical styles and history did not change for any age group.

Enthusiasm for music is high, however. Positive attitudes toward music are expressed by an average of 75% of the students in each age group. Among other indicators of their interest, nearly all teenagers -- 90% at age 13 and 98% at age 17 -- listen to music.

Art. Pursuit of artistic activities outside of school dropped for teenagers. With the exception of photography, per-

centages of students engaging in various artistic activities tended to decline, as did the number who reported collecting either original works of art or reproductions. Teenagers' "valuing" of art -- the importance they placed upon art and their willingness to accept all types of art, not just traditional forms -- went down by 3.3 percentage points at age 13 and 4 percentage points at age 17.

Students may fail to enjoy nontraditional art because for many of them, a work's resemblance to reality is an important feature in its "goodness" or "badness." Students are essentially, as the NAEP report terms them, "artistic literalists." Sizable proportions also appeared to judge a work of art on such criteria as how much it cost, the time spent making it, the opinions of experts and the subject matter portrayed. Knowledge about works of art -- including when, where or by whom they were created -- is not widespread among young people. Performance on these types of items declined for 13-year-olds and did not change for 17-year-olds between assessments.

Changes in performance on drawing and design items did not indicate any clear pattern of improvement or decline. Performance did improve with age and the number of art classes taken, indicating that design and drawing skills can be taught.

State Assessment Results

Both Minnesota and Connecticut replicated portions of National Assessment's music surveys and Connecticut also measured students' art abilities. The states tested students by grade level rather than age -- assessing 4th, 8th and 11th graders. These are the grades in which the majority of 9-, 13- and 17-year-olds are enrolled. Results were then compared to NAEP's "modal grade" data, which provides results for students at each age in the "normal" grade for their age.

In assessing students' music knowledge, Minnesota found that its 4th and 11th grade students had a clear advantage over national achievement levels, but that their 8th graders' achievement was similar to that of the nation. When compared against expectations set by Minnesota music educators, 4th graders were considerably above expected levels while 8th and 11th graders performed acceptably.

Connecticut measured ability to sing and draw as well as knowledge in both music and art. At all three ages, Connecticut youngsters outperformed the nation on both singing and drawing items. While 4th graders in Connecticut were above national levels in their knowledge of music and art, 11th graders were at national levels in both areas. Eighth graders' knowledge of art was slightly above that of the na-

tion; on music items, their knowledge was about at national levels. Connecticut students typically did best on singing and drawing items and not as well on items about the elements and history of art and music.

Implications of the Findings and Recommendations for the Future

In reporting data from the art and music surveys, National Assessment brought together experts in each subject area to help interpret the data and provide recommendations that educators might consider in reviewing the schools' art and music curricula.

Educators targeted the typical arts curriculum in the nation's schools as a large factor in the pattern of results. For many students, their only formal, structured instruction in the arts is in the seventh or eighth grade. Subsequent courses generally emphasize the development and refinement of performance or production skills; courses in history or appreciation of the arts are a rarity. As a result, it might be expected that students' knowledge in these areas would not be high.

Art and music educators consulted by National Assessment agreed that levels of knowledge about the arts were not as high as they would have liked. However, raising these levels appreciably would require a commitment to expand the arts course offerings available in the schools and a decision to focus on instruction on arts history and appreciation as well as performance and production skills. Educators in the area of art made the following recommendations for improving art knowledge and appreciation.

- Art institutions must promote a greater awareness of the importance of art to individual and national well being.
- The myth that one does not have to know anything about art to enjoy it fully should be challenged, and students encouraged to develop a more sophisticated view of art.

Music educators emphasized that more course offerings should be available at the senior high school level. Too often, music courses are only open to those already skilled in music and those coming to music later in life do not have a chance to participate.

A panel of arts educators in Connecticut, on reviewing the state's results, included the following among their recommendations:

- Educators should make every effort to allocate the state-recommended minimum amounts of time to art and music and to use teachers who are certified in the specific subject areas.

- o Since participation in artistic activities is linked with higher performance, students should be encouraged to pursue artistic endeavors.
- o If knowledge about art and music are desired goals for local districts, then more emphasis on such knowledge may be needed.

What is the status of arts education in America today? Are the arts being ignored in favor of other subjects? The answer -- they are not being ignored, although they are not being nurtured as they might be. The arts are being taught, and performance and production opportunities are available for many, though not all, students. Students enjoy music, although their perception of the importance of art may be declining, particularly as they get older. But levels of knowledge about of the arts are not high. However, imparting knowledge about the arts typically has not been a priority goal in our nation's schools. If developing such knowledge is seen as a desirable goal by local school systems, more effort will need to be devoted in this area. Otherwise, current efforts should be maintained to make sure that achievement levels do not erode further.

Additional declines in knowledge about the arts and awareness of the arts' importance to our society might well endanger students' ability to appreciate the arts and deny them the opportunity to participate in supporting or taking part in artistic endeavors.

For More Information

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